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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 000285

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [OSCE](#) [TU](#)
SUBJECT: TURKEY: ERDOGAN STEPS UP CAMPAIGN IN KURDISH
HEARTLAND OF DIYARBAKIR

Classified By: Adana Principal Officer Eric Green for reasons 1.4(b,d)

11. (U) This is an AmCon Adana message.

12. (C) Summary: Prime Minister Erdogan underscored AKP's goal of defeating the pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP) in southeastern Turkey by visiting Diyarbakir, the cultural and commercial center of Turkey's Kurdish region, on February 21. Though the positive tone of his speech was welcomed by locals, he disappointed many by not breaking any new ground on the Kurdish issue. Popular DTP incumbent mayor Osman Baydemir remains the favorite against his lesser known AKP opponent, Kubettin Arzu. In a recent meeting, Baydemir welcomed developments such as the launch of Kurdish-language broadcasting and prosecution of the Ergenekon organization, but complained the AKP government had squandered countless opportunities to gain the trust of Kurds and continues to insult them gratuitously by refusing to meet with the DTP. More electoral support for the DTP, he argued, will empower those in the Kurdish movement who favor peaceful, democratic solutions to the problem. Confident of his own reelection, Baydemir said in his second term he will push the language issue by offering municipal services in multiple tongues and restoring Kurdish and Armenian place names (while retaining the Turkish monikers) on some of the villages connected to the city. Bringing back Diyarbakir's original name (Amed), however, will need to wait. End summary.

Erdogan Takes Aim at Diyarbakir

13. (C) PM Erdogan visited Diyarbakir on February 21 to support AKP's campaign to win the mayoralty from the pro-Kurdish DTP in March 29 elections. Unlike previous visits to the Southeast when Erdogan annoyed the locals with abrasive remarks, he was on his best behavior, saying "we are all first-class citizens" and that AKP stands for "law, freedom and service." He stressed that AKP does not draw distinctions among people on ethnic lines and also renewed his promise to pump billions of dollars into the region in the coming years as the GOT pushes to complete the Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP) by 2012. He also urged voters to reject parties that sow instability and assured the crowd that AKP will give Diyarbakir "the services it deserves."

14. (C) Despite the warmer tone, Erdogan's speech disappointed locals who were expecting new political proposals. Sah Ismail Bedirhanoglu, president of a business association, said the PM should have promised a timetable for

constitutional changes designed to expand Turkish democracy. Pro-Kurdish media also noted that an AKP MP accompanying Erdogan, Dengir Firat, told a NY Times reporter that the ban on speaking Kurdish at political rallies should be lifted, but Erdogan offered no new Kurdish language initiatives in his remarks. Some contacts took heart that Erdogan referred) somewhat obliquely) to human rights abuses committed in Diyarbakir's prison in the years following the 1980 military coup. Finally, Erdogan also played up his Davos role of champion of persecuted Muslims by voicing solidarity with those suffering in Gaza.

15. (C) Security was tight and media report the authorities even jammed cell phone reception in order to disrupt potential trouble-makers. DTP leader Ahmet Turk, meanwhile, reacted to media reports that the PKK planned to sow chaos in the pre-election period, saying the DTP would not seek to escalate tensions. Turk and the DTP were probably making a virtue out of necessity, since DTP activists had been blamed for causing upheavals that reflected poorly on the region during recent visits by Erdogan. Crowd estimates ranged from 10,000 to 20,000.

DTP Still Favored

16. (C) In meetings with the Principal Officer in Diyarbakir February 9-10, local contacts were unanimous in predicting a relatively easy victory for incumbent DTP mayor Osman Baydemir in the March local elections. Former Bar Association President Sezgin Tanrikulu said DTP can count on

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a core vote of about 40 percent, the AKP 30 percent and smaller parties 10 percent. The remaining 20 percent are undecided, but tend to favor DTP. While the situation can change, he said in the worst case scenario Baydemir would receive about 45 percent of the vote, which will be sufficient to win. Contacted after Erdogan's visit to Diyarbakir, Tanrikulu told us that, while the PM's appearance was productive, it will not change the race.

17. (C) Raif Turk, the president of a regional business association, told us the AKP candidate and current parliamentary deputy, Kubettin Arzu, harmed his cause in January by intervening) unsuccessfully) in the elections to the Diyarbakir Chamber of Commerce, which Arzu formerly led. Turk said Arzu's lobbying caused a backlash against AKP meddling. Turk claimed the DTP leadership) and the PKK by implication) originally did not want Baydemir to run as he is becoming too prominent and too independent, i.e. a potential challenge to the preeminence of jailed PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan and de facto leader Murat Karayilan. In the end, Turk said, the DTP realized that it could not risk defeat in Diyarbakir so kept Baydemir.

18. (C) Baydemir himself expressed confidence the DTP vote will increase from the 47 percent it received in Diyarbakir in the 2007 national parliamentary elections and he predicted in the region at large, DTP-led municipalities would rise to 80 from their current 54. The prime reason for the predicted swing to DTP, he said, is that the AKP has slowed down the pace of reform and has not stood up enough to the "deep state" (entrenched security establishment) as was expected. In the Southeast, there are also local complaints with AKP corruption and poor municipal administration, he added.

TRT-6 and Ergenekon

19. (C) Baydemir applauded the launch of TRT-6, the new Kurdish language state TV channel, but said that watching the programs made him emotional as he realized how much had been lost by banning public use of Kurdish for 70 years. He also criticized AKP for introducing the change unilaterally rather than following discussions with people in the region, i.e.

the DTP; moreover, starting the channel three months before the election casts doubt on the sincerity of the move. (Comment: The DTP, however, has been wrong-footed by TRT-6: party spokesmen initially opposed the initiative but as it has proven popular the party now grudgingly embraces it.)

¶10. (C) Baydemir also credited, with caveats, AKP for pursuing the Ergenekon case, noting "As a Turk, I am happy about it, but as a Kurd I'm unhappy" because Ergenekon's biggest crimes were committed in "our region" but the perpetrators are only being held accountable for crimes that took place in western Turkey. The government, he said, must give up the idea that assassinations and disappearances in the Southeast are state secrets. He added that he now believes AKP is not interested in uprooting the deep state. In 2005 the deep state reacted against PM Erdogan's path-breaking speech admitting that mistakes had been made in dealing with the Kurdish issue and calling for expanded democracy to create a solution. The AKP then surrendered to the deep state and is now not interested in more democracy.

Votes = Leverage for DTP

¶11. (C) In terms of dealing with the broader Kurdish question, Baydemir said the more votes DTP receives the better position people like him will be in to push within the movement for peaceful approaches to resolving the issue. He complained that, as long as the AKP refuses to meet with DTP representatives and the judiciary continues to pepper him and his colleagues with petty lawsuits for offenses such as sending greeting cards in multiple languages, it is difficult to make the case that democratic politics are going to advance the Kurdish cause. But, if the DTP can show some success, it will be much easier.

¶12. (C) A former aide to Baydemir, Siyar Ozsoy, told us in a separate discussion that, although Kurdish politics

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(including the DTP) are backward and underdeveloped, the party needs to be included in order to mature and become more responsible. He urged the new U.S. administration to take a fresh, more welcoming approach to the DTP. PO noted that the U.S. Embassy had in fact made some recent overtures to the DTP leadership but they had not been reciprocated.

Pushing the Envelope on Kurdish Language

¶13. (C) Following the election, Baydemir said he plans to break taboos at the local level by gradually expanding the use of Kurdish in municipal services. (The space created by TRT-6 and some recent court rulings should make this possible. In addition, the Health Ministry has also been more open to using Kurdish to ensure public health messages are communicated effectively.) He also said he wants to reintroduce the traditional Kurdish or Armenian names of many of the villages within Diyarbakir's jurisdiction, so the Kurdish name will be posted alongside the official Turkish name. Asked about Diyarbakir's Kurdish name, Amed, Baydemir said on that, it is too early to broach, given the political sensitivities.

Comment

¶14. (C) Even though both the DTP and AKP profess common strategic goals for Turkey) passing an EU-compliant, democratic constitution and limiting the deep state's power) both parties appear overly focused on their tactical electoral competition in the Southeast. As a result, the DTP fails to embrace (and take credit for) reforms such as the introduction of TRT-6 while AKP's refusal to extend even a symbolic hand of cooperation to DTP leads many in the region to conclude that, the PM's words notwithstanding, they and

their political representatives are second-class citizens. Erdogan's emphasis on AKP's commitment to non-discrimination ("we are all brothers") also cuts two ways: while Kurds welcome the promise of equality this rhetoric embodies, they also fear Erdogan's goal is to deny the existence of the Kurds, separate identity and culture.

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